

and after all, you're my wonderwall. by hannahsviolets

Series: [steve harrington's coming out story](#). [2]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: (except the word pan isn't a thing yet but it's implied), (if that will trigger you PLEASE DON'T READ), Biphobia, Bisexual Male Character, Bisexual Steve Harrington, Bulimia, Coming Out, Gay Dustin Henderson, Gay Will Byers, Homophobia, I AM WARNING YOU SLURS ARE USED, Pansexual Mike Wheeler, Past Suicide Attempt, Self Harm, Slurs, bashing of police and reagan and conservatives, ignorance about lgbt issues, major trigger warnings

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Relationships: Past Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler - Relationship, Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson, Steve Harrington & Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington & The Stranger Things Kids, Steve Harrington & Will Byers, Steve Harrington/Original Male Character(s)

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Summary:

Steve reached out and took her hand, but looked around at the six of them. “You guys are the most important thing in the world to me. I always want you to know that and believe it, even if I can’t show it or I’m lost in my own shit. I wish I could give you something to repay you –“

“All you have to do is stay strong and stay alive. That’s all the repayment we need,” said Lucas.

For the first time, Steve felt as if maybe he could do that. Just seeing

the kids and knowing that they loved him and needed him made him feel better than anything any therapist could ever tell him. He thought that maybe, even if he didn't deserve them, he could live for them. And if he kept living for them, maybe one day he would deserve them.

and after all, you're my wonderwall.

Author's Note:

PLEASE READ: this fic may be extremely triggering for some people. but i guess if you read the original story (which you should bc this won't make sense otherwise), then you're fine w it. but i saw ppl complaining about me using slurs in my last fic when i tagged them, but i just wanted to make sure that i warned you guys again that slurs will be used! but tbh, using the q slur is somewhat necessary bc steve knows he isn't gay and doesn't know what else to call it bc this is bumfuck nowhere in the 1980s lmao anyways, after writing the original story, i was sent to the hospital because of a suicide attempt. i'm now doing dbt/partial care rehab for the most of the day, so this is very special to me, just like the first one was.

this was also somewhat rushed towards the end, but i hope that it's still good and that you guys can still enjoy it. thank you for all your kind comments on the original.

To say that things immediately became perfect for Steve was a lie. For someone like Steve, being happy took work. He'd never been a happy person; it had all been an act. No one seemed to understand that – every remark from his parents and the other adults in his life started with “But you used to be so happy.” Steve didn't want to disappoint them by telling them that that couldn't have been further from the truth. He'd had times that were happy, yes, but as a whole, he was stressed out and sad.

The worst thing about recovery was the recovery. If Steve got too anxious or he felt the self-hatred starting to know at him, he couldn't run off to the bathroom to purge. His therapist had said that he had to find healthier outlets to express his frustration, but none of them worked the way that purging did. Dustin suggested chopping up wood with an ax. All that did was remind him of the demodogs,

which reminded him of the demogoron, which reminded him of Nancy and Jonathan. The rubber band method (keeping a rubber band around your wrist and slapping yourself with it harshly) worked the best, but it didn't hurt enough. When Steve had told his therapist that, she raised her eyebrows at him. "Why does it need to hurt?"

"I don't know."

"There has to be a reason. Why do you feel like you have to hurt yourself? Why can't your outlet just be working out or something healthy?"

"Because those things don't work for me. They just stress me out more and remind me that I could be something other than a piece of shit,"

"That's a good thing, Steve. You should want to feel like that,"

He shrugged. "But I don't. I don't . . . it makes me feel like a failure because I'm not all of those things. I'm not an athlete like I should be. I'm not successful like I should be,"

"Just because you're not in college? Everyone works at their own pace,"

"Not me. Even if I reapply in the fall, I'll never be smart enough to get in."

When she said nothing, she said everything that she needed to say.

His parents were ashamed of him and Steve couldn't blame them. Once his mandatory two-week stay was done, the doctors insisted that he live back home for at least a month. Steve didn't know how to say that his parents gave him anxiety because admitting something like that would be admitting a deep part of him that he wasn't quite ready for the world to see. Besides, his father hadn't even looked at him during his visits. He just let his wife talk and stood in the corner, arms crossed and staring at the floor. Being ignored was something Steve was used to and perhaps that normalcy would be good for him.

The kids came to visit him daily at the hospital, but his father

had prohibited their presence at home. He never gave a reasoning for it and Steve was too afraid to ask. He knew he'd let his parents down. He couldn't argue with them or disagree with them ever again. That's what was the most irritating thing. He'd made a promise to himself to be happy and free and yet he was being forced to live under the thumb of people who didn't love him. The therapist had explained to Steve that if they didn't love him, they'd leave, but he knew the truth. He knew they would leave eventually.

"Why do you think that?" she asked.

He slapped the rubber band against his wrist when he couldn't work up the courage to give her an answer.

He'd been right though, of course. His parents never asked him what led up to the breakdown. They'd always talk around it or ignore it all together. Maybe it was because talking about it would be acknowledging that it had happened and acknowledging that it had happened would taint the picture perfect life that they wanted the world to know they had. Steve didn't think talking about it was going to break that picture. Enough people knew what had happened for word to get out.

And then Steve started to panic because if word got out, then rumors would start. Once rumors started, there'd be one about how he'd gone psycho because of Nancy and Jonathan. And then Nancy would be angry with him and as stupid as it was, Steve didn't think that he wanted that. He knew that he couldn't make her love him, but he at least wanted her to like him and not harbor resentment toward him. And Jesus, if Nancy started hating him because of some stupid rumor, then she'd go looking for answers and one of the kids could slip up and tell her about him being a queer. And if she found out, then she'd tell Jonathan and Jonathan would tell Joyce and Joyce would tell her friends and her friends would tell his parents. The stupid rubber band didn't hurt nearly enough to calm any of his fears.

Shit. He needed to puke. He needed to puke now or he was going to lose his goddamn mind.

He locked himself in the bathroom, knowing damn well that

neither of his parents cared what he was doing in there and got down on his knees. *It's where you belong, faggot.* Steve hit the sides of his head until he could see straight again and realized then that he was crying; the kind of crying that you can't control because it's not hysterical, it's just there. He could see Nancy in his head. He could feel her pulling him aside and whispering, "I heard that you're a queer," And he's screaming at her "No! No! I'm not, I'm not!" And she's shaking her head and saying, "I knew it. You were never any good in bed and I guess now I know why," And then he's sobbing and getting down on his knees and begging her not to hate him. She kicks him and says, "I'm glad I've found a real man in Jonathan" and then she spits in his face and tells him to fuck off.

When he stuck his fingers down his throat, it felt foreign because he'd now gone four weeks without doing it.

Fuck the progress. It would be worth it not to be in pain anymore.

But then another face pops into his head. It's Dustin. He's smiling that toothy grin of his. He's telling Steve that he's awesome. He's laughing at some dumb joke that Steve made. He's making Steve feel special and needed.

If Dustin could see him doing this, he'd be horrified. He'd beg for Steve to stop.

Fuck.

He'd be *disappointed*, but not disappointed in Steve, disappointed in this gross thing that's taken him over.

Steve pulled his fingers from his throat and falls back, breaking down in tears once more. Why couldn't he just be better already? Why couldn't he know how to be happy? He thought that he'd only ever been happy with Nancy – and that hadn't even been real. It was all made up. *Just like your fucking sexuality, you piece of indecisive shit.*

After falling asleep to Whitney Houston's soothing voice, he decided that maybe the best thing to do would be to talk to Nancy. He could apologize to her for screwing everything up, and Jonathan wouldn't

be there to rub their relationship in his face. It could just be an easy, simple conversation with the girl he loved where they could talk openly about their feelings. Steve called Nancy around 10, figuring she'd be awake by then, and she agreed to meet him for lunch at Benny's.

She looked stunningly beautiful (though she always did), and when she hugged Steve, he pretended it was out of love and not pity. If he hadn't tried to kill himself, she'd be pissed at him for everything he'd said to her during his breakdown at 7/11. They sat down a table near the back, ordered their food and tried to look anywhere but at the other.

You can do this, Steve told himself.

"Uh, thanks for the flowers. That was nice of you,"

Nancy nodded. "Of course. I was so worried when I heard . . . it was the least that I could do,"

Steve did everything he could not to get excited by her words. Just because she was worried about him didn't mean that she loved him. "No, um, yeah. You didn't have to do that . . . after how I spoke to you. I don't really remember what I said, but I know it was bad,"

"It was," said Nancy. "And I think you should apologize to Jonathan too,"

That was the absolute last thing that he wanted to do. Just looking at Jonathan's face pissed him off. But maybe it would be therapeutic to repair all the bridges he'd burned. "I'm just really sorry, Nancy. That's why I wanted to see you today, just so we could talk things out. I want you to tell me what I did so I can apologize,"

Her eyes widened. "I don't think that's a good idea,"

"Why not?"

"Steve . . ." her voice got quiet. "You just tried to kill yourself. Do you really want me to tell you all the bad things you've done? Won't that just make you – make you h-hate yourself even more?"

He shrugged. Nancy said nothing, as if she was refusing to have this conversation. He tapped his fingers on the table, and thought about everything he could remember that he needed to make up for. It wasn't hard. He'd gone through the list about a thousand times in the past two years. "I'm sorry for accusing you of cheating when you weren't. I'm sorry for the movie theater. I'm sorry I let Tommy and Carol make you feel uncomfortable. I'm sorry for breaking Jonathan's camera – I stand by doing it, but I know you thought it was wrong, so I'm sorry. I'm sorry that Barb is dead because of me. I'm sorry that I didn't make sure she got home okay. I'm sorry that I never knew the right thing to say. I'm sorry I wanted you to forget. I'm sorry that I hated those dinners with Barb's parents. I'm sorry that I couldn't get better grades for you. I'm sorry for being too chicken shit to want to take down the lab. I'm sorry for not being a good boyfriend. I'm sorry that I was never good enough for you. I'm sorry for thinking that I was. I'm sorry for leaving you at that party when you were drunk. I'm sorry for yelling at you all of those times. I'm sorry for making you feel like shit after the breakup. I'm sorry for everything,"

Nancy stared at him with the same remorseful eyes that had greeted him earlier that day. Was she regretting breaking up with him? Was she regretting cheating? Steve tried to keep his expectations low so that he wasn't disappointed, but he couldn't help the way his heart rate had sped up. It was taking Nancy so long to say anything, like she was considering her words, and that had to be a good sign.

"I – I forgive you. For everything. And I'm not just saying that because I feel bad for you. Really, I forgive you,"

Steve smiled. "Thank you. Thank you so much, Nance,"

She smiled back at him. He looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to apologize back for the things that she had done wrong. Even though their breakup had been his fault, Steve knew that Nancy still had things she needed to be sorry for. He wasn't *that* dense. But their food was soon placed in front of them, and Nancy seemed more interested in eating than in saying anything else.

She was just hungry, that's all. She'd apologize later.

But she didn't. Nancy was all the way through her salad when Steve couldn't take the jittery feeling in his stomach any longer. "Um . . . don't you . . . don't you have anything you want to say to me?"

She raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, like . . . I don't want to be an asshole . . . I guess I'm gonna sound like one no matter what I say though . . . fuck . . . don't you . . . don't you want to say sorry too?"

Nancy looked shocked, like this was the last thing that she'd expected him to say. "What do you – you mean that you were in the hospital? I'm sorry . . .?" she sounded totally lost and Steve couldn't understand why.

"No, for – for . . . no . . . for everything else . . . for how we ended,"

She sighed and rubbed at her forehead. He heard a voice in his head telling him that he should just get up and leave, but the irrational part of him told him to stay put. "I can't help having feelings, or not having feelings. You can't help how you feel,"

"Yeah, I guess, but –"

"I can't apologize for loving Jonathan. I'm sorry I cheated on you, really, I am, but I can't apologize for anything else,"

And then, for the first time since they met, Steve found himself not wanting to kiss Nancy or hold her. She was still his Nancy, but she wasn't *his* Nancy. Maybe she never had been. Maybe, like everything else in his life, the good times had all been in his head and that he'd made their relationship out to be something that it never had been. He looked at her for a long time, before uncrossing his arms. "You're not . . . you're not good for me, are you?"

She blinked. "What?"

"I've spent all this time loving you, thinking you were so much better than me, but I can at least apologize. I can admit I was wrong. You lied to me for a year. You watched me fall more in love with you and made me think it was all real, yet I'm the bullshit one," his heart

ached in his chest when Nancy's expression hardened. "I'm sorry I wasn't a good boyfriend. I'll say that as many times as you need me to. And I know that I was never good enough for you, but you always reminded me that I wasn't. Maybe that wasn't your intention, but you did,"

"Steve – I just – we weren't meant to be. I don't know what else to tell you,"

He pulled his wallet out from his jacket and placed a couple of bills on the table. "Nothing. I'm good now, really. And I'm gonna leave you alone now, I'm not gonna make you talk about this anymore. I know it's hard for you," Steve stood up and put his hand on Nancy's shoulder. "Good luck with everything. Seriously. I hope everything works out,"

He didn't look at Nancy's face, knowing that even a glance in her direction would make him want to stay. He loved her so much, loved her still, but that didn't mean that it was right. It wasn't good for him to keep looking at Nancy as some ethereal angel who could do no wrong because it would just make him feel like shit in the long run. He was never going to get what he wanted from her. This was a chapter of his life that needed to end, whether he wanted it to or not.

If he wanted to get better, he needed to let go of Nancy Wheeler.

Steve moved back into his apartment the second that the mandatory month at home was up. It didn't feel like living alone at all, considering that the kids were always making excuses to come over. Steve wasn't stupid – he knew that they were checking in on him to make sure he didn't have a breakdown. It was sweet and he hated that he was annoyed by it, but he was. He felt like he hadn't had time to himself in forever. He just wanted to sleep and watch television in peace.

Still, being alone in his apartment meant the temptation to binge was more prevalent than it would be with others around and as much as his therapist insisted it would, the rubber band technique hadn't

worked. Working at his dad's firm was rough to say the least. He didn't think that anyone knew why he'd been out for those couple of weeks, but everyone was treating him with kid gloves, regardless. They didn't ask for coffee or for copies as often as they would've before. Steve couldn't imagine that his father would say anything to anybody about his stay in the hospital. He'd made it perfectly clear to Steve that he was ashamed of him, so why make his son's failures public information? Could they tell that he was a queer? Were they able to tell that he'd made out with men in the bathroom stalls of seedy bars?

When his father called him into his office one day, Steve knew that he was in deep shit. Mr. Harrington had made a point of avoiding Steve at work so that it didn't look like he was being given any more special treatment than he already was (even though Steve knew that the real reason was because he was ashamed of him).

"Steven, lemme ask you a question. You've heard of *Franklin's*?" his dad got straight to the point, his hands folded over his desk the second that Steve sat down. Steve's heart raced in his chest – his worst fears had come true. This could not be happening, not so soon, not now. He was supposed to be in recovery. He didn't need this right now.

"Um . . . I . . . uh . . . no. Why?" It was stupid to pretend that he had no idea what his dad was talking about because if he'd even asked, he knew that Steve knew. Still, he wasn't going to go out without a fight.

"Don't bullshit me. For once in your life, be a man. Tell me the truth," he paused, rubbing at his temples. "Have you heard of *Franklin's*?"

Steve took a deep breath. "Maybe in passing,"

"In passing? Really? Then why did Oliver's cousin see you go in there?"

Oliver was his father's top executive and best friend. Steve had always disliked him, thinking him to be far too pompous and pretentious for his own good, but this solidified his hatred. That was

why everyone had been treating him with kid gloves lately – because Oliver’s cousin had opened up his big fucking mouth and then Oliver had opened his big fucking mouth and no one wanted to bother Steve for a damn cup of coffee because they didn’t want his AIDS germs all over them. He hadn’t been down to Franklin’s since the night of his breakdown. Had everyone known about him for that long?

“I . . . I don’t . . . maybe he didn’t . . . he could be mistaken . . .”

“He’s not mistaken. He said when you left, you walked right past him with a hickey on your neck. He said he said your name to make sure it was you, and you turned around,”

Fuck. He must’ve been drunk. He couldn’t remember shit.

“I – maybe it was – another – I don’t –“

“Cut the crap. I don’t even want to ask you what you were thinking or why you were down there, but I want you to know that the whole firm knows. Our family is the laughing stock of my own company,”

Steve shut his eyes, attempting to hold back tears. He squeezed his hands into fists, pushing his fingernails into his skin.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

“What do you want me to say?” asked Steve. *Don’t be bullshit*, he told himself. *Be honest. Face the music.*

His father stared back at him like that was the worst thing that he could’ve said. “I want you to know that I’m not going to tolerate this. And maybe if you’d been more careful, we could just pretend that you were normal, but we can’t do that anymore. Everyone knows now,”

“I –“

“Let me finish. I don’t want this getting back to your mother. It would break her heart to hear, don’t you agree?”

Steve didn’t think that he’d ever felt smaller in his life. He tentatively nodded, sinking down in his chair.

“So here’s what we’re gonna do – you’re going to resign from this company. You’re going to go back to your apartment. I will ship your things from home to you. And then, you’re going to get out of our lives,”

This was the fight with Tommy and the breakup with Nancy magnified times ten. It was stupid for Steve to be this upset because he’d always known that his parents didn’t give a shit about him, but they were still his parents. They were still the people who were supposed to love him no matter what and had chosen not to because he wasn’t good enough. Will and Eleven had murdered people and Joyce and Hopper still loved them. He’d never murdered anyone, but somehow just his existence was worse. Steve tried to think of something his therapists had said about looking out for himself and about accepting that he wasn’t always in the wrong, but he kept drawing blanks.

“Dad – I – I – I love you – why – I’m sorry . . . what can I do?”

“Save it, Steven. If you loved us, you wouldn’t have done this to us,”

“Aren’t you supposed to love me no matter what I do?”

His father’s eyes darkened, but Steve could see an obvious sadness in there and he wondered if maybe his words had gotten through to whatever heart the man in front of him had. “This is too much. We accepted all of your crap. This is different and you know it,”

Steve couldn’t even scoff. “I like guys too! How is that the worst thing in the world?”

“Keep your voice down,” he gritted through his teeth. “Haven’t you humiliated me enough?”

“I can’t change how I feel. I’ve tried to . . . I’ve tried to *so hard* . . .”

“Not hard enough,” his dad handed him a sealed envelope from on top of his desk without hesitation. “Here’s your final paycheck,”

he then handed Steve a piece of paper. “You can sign here, indicating your resignation,”

“So that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Steve had always known his father to be a bad man. He’d stayed up with his mother on countless nights comforting her and listening to her tell him about how her husband had mistreated her enough times to know that. And he’d also always known that he never wanted to be anything like his father. The man had screwed him over so many goddamn times and yet Steve had still managed to have some faith that he’d come around. Steve thought now that maybe this wasn’t his fault, but his dad’s. Yeah, he’d screwed up, and yeah, he shouldn’t be who he was, but that didn’t mean that he wasn’t worthy of his parents’ love. They shouldn’t have signed on to be parents if they weren’t going to love him no matter what he turned out to be. For once, something wasn’t his fault. He hadn’t done anything wrong.

He took a long breath in and then exhaled slowly. “I tried to kill myself and you barely cared. This – this is what makes you pay attention to me? I’ve spent my whole life thinking that I did something to make you hate me, but no. It’s always been all you. I can’t help who I’m attracted to and I can’t help who I am. But this is me, dad. I was never that star athlete ladies man you thought I was, not really. It was all just an act. I don’t want to act anymore – I’m too tired,”

“This doesn’t change anything,” his father sighed, refusing to make eye contact.

“I know. I just wanted you to know that I’m not sorry that I like guys. I am sorry that you and mom are too close-minded and heartless to accept me for me. I’ll miss you guys – well, I can’t miss you because I never really knew you. I’m sorry for that, too,”

“Just sign the damn paper and stop being so god damn dramatic,”

Steve didn’t know why he felt more empowered then than he had

been in his whole life. He should be breaking down and sobbing, begging his father to stay. He just couldn't do it, though. What he could do was shrug and sign his name on the dotted line. His father took it quickly and cleared his throat. "It's been nice knowing you, Steven,"

"No, it hasn't. Don't lie. You know, that's the one thing that I learned from you after years of listening to you lie – don't lie. You taught me how not to be, and I want to thank you for that,"

And with that, Steve walked out of his father's office. For the first time, he didn't care even a little bit about the looks he received.

That empowered feeling quickly faded and was replaced with emptiness. Steve didn't leave his apartment for a whole week, feeling too scared to face the outside world. He'd unknowingly been out for a good month. Will was the only person in all of Hawkins who was out, and the only reason he hadn't been killed was because everyone was too scared of Hopper. All Steve had were his kids and while they were excellent at protecting people, the rest of the town didn't know that. The paranoid voice in his head was telling him that if he went outside, he'd be beaten by every homophobe in Indiana. It had led to him sitting next to the toilet every night, trying to convince himself to throw up all the bad feelings. So far, he hadn't actually done anything, which, as fucked up as it was, he was disappointed about.

He was always such a pussy. He was always too afraid, always too much of a coward.

On his eighth day of lying in bed and crying, the kids showed up. They hadn't called first and he'd honestly considered not answering the door before he heard Max yell "Open up, shithead!" Even then, he wanted to keep the covers over his head. He hadn't brushed his teeth or his hair and he hadn't showered in a couple of days. He didn't want the kids to see him like this.

Still, he wasn't about to leave them outside. So Steve put on his bathrobe and timidly answered the door.

“Hey buddy,” said Dustin.

“Sorry for calling you a shithead,” said Max. “I just wanted to get your attention,”

“It’s okay,” Steve muttered, scratching at his wrists that still itched from the scars. “Come on in,”

Lucas was holding a giant, unnaturally sized envelope, but said nothing about it. Steve hoped that it wasn’t a get-well card or anything like that. He didn’t even want to think about how embarrassing that would be.

All seven of them sat down on the shitty, stained couch that Steve had bought for thirty-five bucks months ago. No one looked awkward or uncomfortable or like they’d been forced to be there, and Steve felt thankful for that. Mike swallowed down an obvious lump. “We heard about your parents. Hopper told us. We’re really sorry,”

“It’s okay,”

“No, it isn’t,” said Lucas. “It’s awful. They’re awful,”

“They were going to find out sooner or later. This was kind of inevitable,”

“Parents are supposed to love you no matter who or what you are. That’s the whole point,” Will noted, scooting closer to Steve.

“I know that. I just can’t help feeling guilty and miserable, even though I know that they’re the ones who are wrong, you know?”

“I understand,” said El.

“Me too,” said Will.

There’s silence after that, and Steve can’t help but wonder what Eleven and Will are thinking about. He suddenly feels guilty because they’ve been through a hell of a lot worse than him. God, he was such a baby. His dad was right, he should man up. And, fuck. The kids shouldn’t be taking care of him. He shouldn’t be putting this responsibility on them. This was all so wrong . . .

“We made you something,” said Max, interrupting his thoughts.

The god damn get well card.

“Will made it,” Mike explained. “It was his idea. The rest of us just kind of added to it,”

Lucas handed Steve the envelope. His hands shook as he took it and tentatively opened it. Inside was a thin book the length of his torso, but it didn’t look like any old get well card. On the cover, was a carefully drawn picture of Steve wearing his ray bans and holding his bat. Beside him, stood all six of the kids. They were all smiling. Steve’s heart ached in his chest. He was so touched by this, and he didn’t understand why. He should be embarrassed about always having to have the kids treat him like some fragile thing. “You drew this, Will?”

The boy nodded.

“It’s beautiful. You’re so talented, man. Seriously, one day you’re gonna make more money than all of us. For real, I love it,”

Will blushed but didn’t let Steve compliment him any further. “Open it up! The cover’s just the cover,”

Steve did as told and opened it to the first page. In bold, black letters read “What El loves about Steve: He’s pretty. He gives the best piggyback rides. He watches *General Hospital* with me. He is funny. His hair is so nice. He is so silly. He is a good friend.” Everything was misspelled, which just made it all the more special. Steve looked up to say something, but Dustin stopped him.

“You gotta read the whole thing first,”

He nodded and turned the page.

“What Mike loves about Steve: I thought he was going to be a dumb douchebag who only hung out with me for my sister. He is the complete opposite of that. I’d take a bullet for him.”

“What Lucas loves about Steve: He’s the Han Solo to my Lando Calrissian. I’d let him beat me in the Kessel Run any day, as long as

we could still be friends.”

“What Will loves about Steve: Aside from being super handsome and dreamy, he is also the best guy in the world! It makes me so happy knowing I have someone like me to look up to. I can’t wait to go to Pride with him some day, and I hope we both meet cute boys there! I love you, Steve!”

“What Max loves about Steve: I don’t want to get too sappy because the Party will read this, but you’re the brother I never had. You mean more to me than you’ll ever know.”

“What Dustin loves about Steve: You are the coolest guy ever! You are nice, funny, smart and brave! I don’t get how you don’t see all of that. I want to be just like you when I get older (and yes, that is a good thing!). I can’t wait for you to find somebody special who deserves you and sees all the wonderful things about you. I love you, big brother!”

And then on the last page: “We, the Party, are officially adopting Steve so that we can protect him from any further harm. Thank you so much for everything, Steve. We love you!”

There was so much to say all at once, but nothing would truly give what Steve was feeling justice. He wanted to cry, but crying wasn’t good enough. He wasn’t good enough to hold this perfect, perfect thing in his hands. And God, he needed to protect it. He had ruined everything else in his life, but he would not ruin this and he would not ruin these kids. How could they love him so much? What could Hawkins’ resident fuck up Steve Harrington have ever done to deserve these perfect kids?

“You think it’s dumb, don’t you?” asked Dustin, reaching for it back. “That’s okay,”

Steve pulled it away from his grasp. “No! No. I just – it’s – I don’t know what to say . . . it’s . . . it’s like – it’s like I’m holding the entire universe in my hands. I’m scared it’s going to break if I even say thank you,”

“You’re welcome,” Max shrugged.

Steve reached out and took her hand, but looked around at the six of them. “You guys are the most important thing in the world to me. I always want you to know that and believe it, even if I can’t show it or I’m lost in my own shit. I wish I could give you something to repay you –“

“All you have to do is stay strong and stay alive. That’s all the repayment we need,” said Lucas.

For the first time, Steve felt as if maybe he could do that. Just seeing the kids and knowing that they loved him and *needed* him made him feel better than anything any therapist could ever tell him. He thought that maybe, even if he didn’t deserve them, he could live for them. And if he kept living for them, maybe one day he would deserve them.

El was the first one to hug him. She stood to his side and wrapped her thin arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder. Next came Will, who sat down on Steve’s other side and took Steve’s arm and wrapped it around himself. The last four came all together as Dustin pushed them forward and they landed on top of Steve, El and Will in a heap. Steve laughed – a genuine, belly laugh that he hadn’t heard in a long time. He didn’t even know that he could laugh like that anymore.

In December, Steve and Will decided to take a trip up to the city to visit an underground resource center for people like them. They’d been looking into it for a couple of weeks – with Joyce’s help, of course – and when Will was off for winter break, they took advantage of the opportunity.

“Now, you’re positive you have the right directions?” asked Joyce for the thousandth time as Steve loaded Will’s things into the back of his car.

“Positive,” said Steve.

“You better be back by Monday like you promised. We have to go

see *Spies Like Us* this week!” Dustin reminded him, practically chasing him around.

“I know, I know,”

“I think this is a little more important than your stupid Chevy Chase, Dustin,” said Will. Joyce lifted Will from behind and enveloped him in a million kisses all over his face, squeezing him tight. “Mom! Stop!” he giggled.

Joyce laughed along with him before pressing a final kiss to his forehead. “You be safe, baby. And remember to listen to Steve, he knows what he’s doing,” she looked up at him and winked. “Oh, and remember to wear your seatbelt! And only talk to strangers if Steve says it’s okay!”

“Got it, Mom,” Will rolled his eyes, but they all knew that he didn’t mean it.

Joyce opened up her arms and Steve walked forward, accepting the warm embrace she wrapped him into. “Thank you for taking care of my boy,” she whispered. “You’re such a good boy, Steve,”

“Aw, thanks, Mrs. Byers. You’re the best,”

She kissed him on the cheek and patted him on the shoulder. Dustin and Mike looked on awkwardly, and Steve couldn’t help but wonder why Mike had come, because he hadn’t said anything since arriving. He almost commented on it, but Jonathan’s car pulled up, turning everyone’s attention to the teen.

“Jonathan! You almost missed them!” said Joyce.

“I know, Mom, I’m sorry,” he hurried out of the car and over to the trunk. Nancy stepped out of the passenger seat and Dustin and Mike both looked worriedly at Steve. Jonathan handed Will his jean jacket. “I want you to take this with you, buddy. It’s like – your first time being away from us. Well, your first *real* time, anyway. I want you to take me with you,”

Nancy tapped on Steve’s shoulder, drawing him away from watching the two brothers. “Hey,”

“Hey,” he said with an honest smile.

“How are you?”

“Good, you?”

She nodded. “Same. Listen, Jonathan wouldn’t tell me where you guys are going. He said that you should tell me yourself. Care to share?”

Steve looked around him, hearing that voice in the back of his head telling him that Nancy had always known the truth about him. That she would hate him and judge him and throw eggs at him or something. His eyes flickered to Dustin and Mike, and the weight in his chest was then lifted. Who cared what Nancy thought of him? “A gay center, or a queer center, whatever you want to call it. I’m a queer,”

Nancy raised her eyebrows and her mouth dropped. She blinked a few times, like she was hallucinating. “You’re -?”

“Yeah. I like guys. And girls. I like both. And that’s . . . that’s okay,”

“Oh, oh, yeah. Yeah, it is. Of course it is! I’m just – wow. I never would’ve thought . . .”

“Me neither. But here we are,”

“You ready, Steve?” Will asked. Steve turned his head.

“Yeah, man. I’m ready,”

He didn’t even have time to be proud of himself for facing his fear, and even if he did, he didn’t know if he would’ve patted himself on the back. Steve didn’t know how to give himself praise, which was something he was working on with his therapist.

“Hey, um,” called Mike. His hands were in his pockets and he stood next to Dustin, where he hadn’t moved from since arriving. “Could I . . . could I come too?”

Steve and Joyce exchanged looks.

“I already asked my mom. I just told her you guys were going on a road trip,” Mike exclaimed. Nancy’s eyebrows rose up again. Jonathan moved to put his hand on her shoulder.

“Well then, yeah, man. Of course,” said Steve.

Mike held up his backpack. “All packed. I um, I kind of figured you’d say yes,”

Will’s cheeks were bright red, like he thought he was dreaming. Steve smirked. Will had an obvious crush on Mike that Steve thought was adorable.

The three of them loaded into Steve’s car – Will in the passenger seat, Mike in the back – and immediately, Will pulled a cassette tape out of his bag, claiming that Steve had awful taste in music. Neither of them mentioned Mike’s presence or asked him any questions, because they knew that they wouldn’t have wanted anyone to do that to them. Mike clearly appreciated it though, because he actually started speaking and joking along with them after the third song. It made Steve feel happy, but also sad because he wished that he could’ve had a trip like this when he was a kid.

It took them about five hours to arrive to their destination, and when they got there, the cheerful air diminished. They couldn’t joke around and draw attention to themselves here. This was supposed to be a secret establishment – Steve had only found out about it from the bartender at Franklin’s. The place was disguised as a bookstore, but Steve thought that the small rainbow sticker on the front door gave it away. Will touched it like Steve had touched the card the kids had given him.

There was a woman with a buzzed head and a leather jacket at the front desk. She eyed them, as if afraid that they were there to cause problems.

“Hi,” said Steve. “Um, I’m Steve. This is Will. This is Mike. We’re from Hawkins. I um, I heard about this place from a guy at Franklin’s . . .?”

The woman nodded. "Frankie?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"He's a good guy. I'm Ellen. I run the joint. What can I help you boys with today?"

Steve smiled, feeling thankful that he was accepted so quickly. "We just wanted to learn more about everything. There's not exactly much at home, and you know, I don't – I don't even know what I am."

Ellen looked over to Will and Mike. "What about you? Do you know what you are?"

"I'm gay," said Will proudly.

"I . . . uh . . . I don't . . ." Mike trembled in his place.

"That's okay," said Ellen. "It's okay not to know what you are. It's just great that you're here,"

Ellen led them over to the back, where a bunch of couches and arm chairs were scattered. There were a couple of other people already sitting there, which made Steve feel oddly comforted. Ellen handed them each a couple of pamphlets about the place's history and about some place in New York called Stonewall, where the gay rights movement had started. Will and Mike both read them intently and even Steve, who normally hated reading, found himself fascinated. He had no idea that there was so much history around this.

And better yet, in one of the pamphlets, he came across the word 'bisexual.' He'd never heard the word before and according to the pamphlet, it meant "someone who is sexually attracted to both men and women." Steve felt his heart race in his chest just reading it. It felt so familiar – it felt like *home*. He was real. There were people just like him in the world. He wasn't a freak like the guy in that bar had said. He was bisexual. Steve Harrington was bisexual.

He must've been crying, because Will put his hand on his arm. "Are you okay?"

Steve sniffled absentmindedly and blinked away some tears. “Yeah, I’m just . . . I’m just really happy,”

Will beamed. “Me too,”

There weren’t just gay and bisexual people. There was a whole acronym called LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender. And queer was a universal term apparently – a slur directed at all of them (Steve felt guilty about using it so often). When Steve asked Ellen for more information on bisexuality, he read that a lot of times gay people didn’t believe that bisexuality was a real thing, which explained the behavior of that guy at the bar. That part should’ve made Steve feel bad, but it didn’t. He was so happy. This was why he’d survived the breakdown, so that he could get to this moment.

Later in the day, Ellen took them downstairs for the weekly LGBT meeting. There were people of all ages there, but Will and Mike were the youngest. People kept going up to them, telling them how amazing it was for them to be there and be so accepting of themselves. The boys were still nervous and hesitant though, only opening up a little when they saw Steve smiling down at them. The person running the meeting was black and Steve assumed that they were transgender. Just knowing that word existed made him feel smarter. Ellen whispered in Steve’s ear that the person’s name was Jesse and he used he/him pronouns.

Jesse started the meeting by having them all go around and say their names, their gender identity and their sexuality. Steve liked listening to everyone else introduce themselves more than introducing himself. However, saying “I’m Steve. My gender identity is male and I’m bisexual,” felt so damn good coming out of his mouth.

“I’m Will. My gender identity is male and I’m gay,” said Will.

They both looked questioningly at Mike. “Um, I’m Mike. I’m um, I’m a guy and I um, I don’t . . . I’m not . . . I’m . . . confused.”

“Confused is okay,” Jesse winked at him.

The meeting continued, and led to Jesse talking about the AIDS

crisis going on. Steve knew as much about it as anyone in Hawkins did – it was the “gay disease” and that gays were killing people with it. However, the pamphlets had explained that it wasn’t just a gay problem and that the reason that more LGBT had it was because of the lack of information and sex education. Jesse talked about how President Reagan’s homophobia was the cause of the epidemic getting worse, because he refused to talk about it, because talking about it would be acknowledging that LGBT existed. A couple people in the room started crying when they heard how passionate Jesse was about it, and Steve later learned that it was because they had loved ones and partners who’d died from the disease.

Steve felt passionate himself after hearing Jesse speak. He’d never thought much about AIDS (aside from when he was sucking dick in the club) and he’d never thought about the LGBT community until today. Now that he knew about that and knew about them, he felt fiercely protective, like the way that he felt about the kids. People like them, people like him, weren’t given a voice in the government. Reagan *hated* people like them. He hated them so much that he was just letting them die. Maybe they were freaks and maybe they were unnatural, but they were still human! Everyone in America was supposed to be equal, but if AIDS had been known as “the straight disease,” Steve knew that they would’ve found a cure already.

He approached Jesse after the meeting, asking him if they could talk tomorrow about Steve maybe getting more involved. He hadn’t really felt strongly about anything besides the kids since his breakup with Nancy, and feeling like he did now – well, he wanted to act on it.

Will, Mike and Steve spent the night in a shitty motel where they had to ask for a cot because there were only two beds and Will and Mike didn’t feel comfortable sleeping next to each other right then (they didn’t say that, but Steve knew). The three of them sat up watching *Saturday Night Live* until they were too exhausted from their long day to even keep their eyes open. Despite that, as soon as Will fell asleep, Mike turned to Steve. “Thanks for letting me come,”

“Of course,”

“And thanks for not making a big deal out of it. Anyone else

would have,”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

“Yeah, they would have.”

Steve is quiet, then simply adds, “If you ever want to talk about anything, I’m here. Even if you just need me to listen.”

“I know that. And I trust you. I think I trust you more than I’ve ever trusted anyone in my entire fucking life. Except maybe El,”

“Does she -?”

“Yeah, she does. We don’t keep secrets. Friends don’t lie,” Mike added, as if it was obvious.

Steve got a job working at the center. He had to drive the five hours just to get there, but it was worth it (that, and he only worked three days a week). It was nice to feel passionate about doing something. Hell, it was nice to just *want* to do something.

He worked with Jesse most times. Some days were more boring than others and consisted of filing paperwork and working on those new computer things. Other days were fun. Jesse was trying to open up a shelter for homeless LGBT youth, and the days that Steve got to interact with those poor kids were the best ones (which Steve felt guilty about, because getting enjoyment out of someone else’s misery shouldn’t be exciting. Except it wasn’t really exciting. He liked getting to help them and make a difference in their lives – it made him feel useful and needed).

“You’re super hot, but you’ve also got charisma and empathy. Those three things will make people open up to you,” said Jesse while they ate lunch one Sunday. “This job isn’t for everybody – not by a fucking long shot, but I think you might be perfect for it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. It must’ve been fucking fate when you walked into the center that day,”

“I’ve never really been good at anything before,” It had slipped out before Steve could stop it. To cover up his melancholic tone, he added, “Besides sex,”

Jesse laughed. “You’re good for more than just sex, Steve. You’ve proved that,”

It was nice to have found a friend in someone who wasn’t fourteen. Jesse was a couple of years older than Steve, but he seemed like he was about fifty with everything that he’d been through. Listening to the hardships that he and his friends had endured made Steve feel shitty for ever complaining about his own problems. On the other hand, he was glad to be able to be making a difference in the lives of the less fortunate.

He was also learning so many new things, and learning that things he’d been taught hadn’t exactly been the truth.

Upon seeing how well Steve was doing, Hopper pulled him aside after one of his shifts at the diner. He asked him if he’d ever thought about applying to the police academy. “You’re awfully good with a bat, son. You could be better with a gun,”

“Ah, no thanks, Chief. Not really my thing,”

Hopper patted his arm and motioned for him to take a seat. Steve sighed and did so. “No offense or anything, Steve, but what are your plans for the future? I mean, you can’t just work here your whole life,”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s kind of a dead end job,”

“Everything in Hawkins is a dead end job,” Steve exclaimed.

Hawkins rubbed at his forehead. “I know I make it sound pretty boring most of the time, but being a cop’s a great job. You can really make a difference,”

Steve let out a loud laugh. Hopper eyed him, confused. “That’s a joke, right?”

“No? What’s so funny? What are you trying to say?”

“Don’t take offense to this, but cops are pigs,”

Hopper rolled his eyes. “Oh, what, did someone give you a DUI once? Break up a party of yours for loud music and underage drinking?”

“No. I hate them because of the shit they’ve put black people through for decades. I hate them because they attacked my people at Stonewall, as well as a bunch of other fucking times in a bunch of other different places. They’re a racist, homophobic hate group created by the capitalist system that benefits no one except the straight, white, rich man.”

Hopper looked at him as if he had ten heads. Like he was stupid, like he didn’t know what he was talking about. Maybe Steve had only just learned these things about the police, but that didn’t change the fact that they were true. He knew in his heart of hearts that they were. And God, he was so fucking sick of everyone treating him like he was an idiot just because he wasn’t good with tests and essays and shit.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The truth,”

“Your people?”

“I’m bisexual,” said Steve. He felt so proud to say it, like it wasn’t a disease or something to be ashamed of. “Go ahead and threaten me, tell me whatever you think, I don’t care. And as a bisexual man, I will not join a force that puts my people – yes, my people – through so much suffering,”

Hopper was speechless. It was the most silent that Steve had ever seen him, but it wasn’t in an offensive way. It was more like he was just lost, like he wasn’t sure that what Steve had said wasn’t some sort of hallucination.

The next day, Steve told Jesse all about the confrontation.

“Hell yeah, man. Stick it to the man,” said Jesse, sticking up his fist. Steve gave him a fist bump, which made Jesse laugh (Steve wasn’t sure why).

He hadn’t had the urge to throw up since he started volunteering. It was like all of his unhappiness had been grounded in being in the closet. His therapist kept telling him how proud she was of him, and how coming out had been the best decision he’d ever made. Steve thought so too, even if he didn’t have Tommy or Nancy or his parents. He was so much happier without all of them and the judgment that came with them.

And this time when he took Dustin to the high school version of the snow ball, he went inside with him because he was chaperoning. (Steve Harrington, chaperoning. He couldn’t imagine what Tommy and Carol would have to say about that.) Dustin had a date this time, too. Some girl who’d joined AV club a couple of months ago named Samantha.

“Be a gentleman, but not too much of a gentleman because nerd girls won’t like that. She’s probably a huge feminist, but even if she is, she still wants to be swept off her feet. Every girl does, whether they want to admit it or not. So open the doors for her and get punch for her, but when you give her the punch, make sure you pour it and then give it to her. Then pour your own. And when you ask her to dance, ask her casually. Don’t make it a big romantic thing because that’ll embarrass her . . .”

“Steve, I know her better than you do,” Dustin groaned. “Besides, your advice never works,”

“My advice would work if you would do it correctly. And no matter what you do, don’t call her m’lady,”

“I only did that one time!”

“And it will forever live infamy,”

Much of Steve’s advice had changed since he started volunteering, as well. He’d never considered himself a misogynist by any means, but he thought that maybe his promiscuity could’ve been seen as

chauvinistic. While he was trying to move on from his past, no one could completely escape what they'd seen and done. And while Steve's nightmares consisted of demodogs and Mindflayers, his regrets consisted of the way he'd treated his sexual conquests in high school. Sure, he'd been kind and respectful, but part of him was afraid that he was exactly like the men that feminist pamphlets spoke of. He couldn't take back what he'd done and the only thing that he could do now was pass on everything that'd he learned to Dustin and the boys.

"That's all you can do," said Ellen. "I'm gonna be honest with you, though, Steve. I don't think you've got a bigoted bone in your body. Other people, though, it's ingrained in them. They can't think any other way because they don't have the brains to. You're smart, though. You get people. You're one of the good ones, Stevie."

Six months passed by.

Steve Harrington hadn't thrown up since November. He hadn't wanted to since February, and when that had happened, he called Jesse and Jesse talked him out of it.

He'd quit his job at the diner and moved out to the city full time. Jesse's center had opened up in May, and Steve was living there so that the patients would have 24 hour care if need be. He and Ellen had the same hours, and the two of them had become best buds since first meeting. The patients found comfort in their friendship – it was nice for them to see a man and a woman getting along without anything sexual being there. Oddly enough, it gave them hope for their own, non-heterosexual futures.

Jesse gave Steve the week off for the zeitgeist of Pride week. He wanted to take the kids to New York to visit Stonewall and pay their respects to the legends who'd fought for his freedom. As dumb as it sounded, Steve thought that this week was going to be the best of his life – the one that he'd survived to get to. I mean, he'd be getting to spend a week with his favorite people, celebrating himself and all of those like him.

"You better get the bi flag painted on your cheeks when we get there!" said Will in the car. "If I have rainbows all over my face, you have to do the same!"

"I'm not gonna get laid with face paint all over me," said Steve.

"Ew. Don't be gross," Max stuck out her tongue.

"Seriously, though, what do you guys think of this look? You think anyone will notice me?"

"Pretty," El smiled.

"Good," said Mike.

"Who'd want to date your ass?" Lucas giggled and Will hit him playfully.

Jonathan and Nancy were in New York as well, visiting NYU (Steve had rolled his eyes, because of course they wanted to go to college together), and no one was bringing that up. On their last day, Jonathan was going to stop by so that Will could see the school, but that was the end of it. Steve was surprised at himself for being able to think about Jonathan and Nancy together without crying. He had come out to Nancy, though, after all, and he'd once thought that he would rather die than have her know the truth about him. Maybe Steve Harrington had grown up after all.

Steve told the kids all about Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P Johnson on the ride up, and told about Storme DeLarverie and Bayard Rustin at the hotel. By the time it was time to go to the first parade, everyone (even the ones who insisted that they were straight) was pumped to celebrate. Mike had come out to Steve a couple of months before, confessing to him that he thought he might be bisexual but wanted another name for it, but had asked him not to tell anyone else. Despite that, he got the rainbow flag painted on his cheek, which made Will the happiest that Steve had ever seen him.

Steve carried El on his shoulders so that she could look at the signs that the protesters were carrying. Lucas and Max joined in on it, chanting, "We're here, we're queer!" along with the crowd, which

would've borrowed Steve if any other heteros had been doing it, but when it was Lucas and Max, it made him smile. He'd clearly made an impact on them.

Dustin was screaming something at Steve, but he couldn't make it out over the noise. "What?" he screamed back.

Dustin screamed again, but still nothing.

Steve sighed, put El back on the ground and took Dustin's hand, leading him to the steps of a nearby store. "What?"

"I think I might be gay."

Being shocked by someone's sexuality wasn't the reaction that you were supposed to give. Steve knew that from his own experience, and his experience working at the shelter. He *was* shocked, to say the least, though. Since when? Why hadn't Dustin said anything before? Had he thought that Steve would judge him, or worse, that he didn't care? Had he not been there for Dustin enough? Shit. He shouldn't have moved away. He should've stayed put in boring old Hawkins just so that he could keep being there for the kids – or, well, be there for them more.

This isn't about you. Don't make this about you.

"That's really cool, Dustin," said Steve, ruffling his hair.

"Really?"

"I love you no matter who you are. After all, you did that with me,"

Dustin's eyes welled up with tears and he wrapped his arms around Steve, hugging him tightly. Okay, so there wasn't any ill will there. He still loved him. Worrying sometimes led to nothing. His therapist told him that often, and this was the first time that Steve had believed her.

After taking the kids for lunch, they made their way to Stonewall, so that Steve could leave flowers out front.

"That's dumb. It's not like it's a gravesite. People are still working

here,” said Max.

“It’s metaphorical,” said Steve. “They represent all of the LGBT who have died for simply being who they were,”

“I think it’s beautiful,”

Steve turned his head. As if in slow motion, a man was revealed to him. It was like Nancy all over again, except this time, times one thousand, like a big bang. He was the most beautiful person that Steve had ever seen in real life, with dark skin and wildly curly hair that stuck up in all directions. His smile was like that of a sun, so blinding that he couldn’t look at it for too long.

“Oh . . . um . . . thanks,” Steve stuttered, his posture tilting as he tried not to babble like an idiot.

Lucas smirked at him. Max caught on to what Steve was feeling and threw her arm around him. “This is Steve,”

The man laughed. He had a beautiful laugh, like bells. “I’m Johnny,” he held out his hand and Steve shook it, focusing intently on the feel of his skin. “Is this your little sister and her friends?”

“Not exactly –“

“We’re his family!” said Dustin, stepping next to Steve.

Johnny grinned. “Nice to meet you guys. ‘Steve’s family.’”

“I – I um, yeah. They’re . . . um, listen, do you maybe want to go across the street? Get some food? I um, I can’t drink with them. I’m sort of um, in charge, I’m sorry . . .” said Steve.

“That’d be great. I’d love to eat with you. And your family of course,”

“Awesome! I mean, uh, yeah. That’d be cool,”

“Smooth move,” Mike whispered in his ear as they all crossed the street together.

In that moment, everything was perfect. There really was no other

word for it. If you had told Steve a year ago that this would be his life, he would've laughed in your face. He never would've been able to guess that he'd have even a quarter of what he had now. He was out of the closet, he had a job that he loved, he had friends that cared about him and soon, he'd have a boyfriend that loved the shit out of him. And this time, it was real. Johnny would tell Steve every morning how much he loved him and Steve could feel the honesty in his voice. He'd gotten there, to a place that he never thought even existed. The path to get there hadn't been the one that he'd planned on, but it was there: happiness.

Steve Harrington was happy. He was loved, and more importantly, he loved himself.